

The Technology of Print: Is Faster Better?

THE technology of printing and publishing has undergone extraordinary changes in recent years. Like most citizens, I have not given much thought to the technological advances themselves, or to their effect on the way people think and communicate. Recently, however, I had an experience that caused me to reflect on what has been happening.

One Tuesday afternoon I received a telephone call from an editor of *The New York Times* Sunday business section. Would I be willing to write a few hundred words about a new book? I had already read the book, and not having any writing commitments for the forthcoming month, I said yes.

"By the way," I asked, "what is your deadline?"

"Thursday," was the reply.

"Which Thursday?" I asked.

"This Thursday," he said, "for this Sunday's section, which is printed on Friday."

I hung up the phone feeling uneasy. I am used to urgency and deadlines in my daily work, especially when submitting bids for construction projects. But writing under pressure is something else again. Within the space of three or four hours—not weeks—I would have to clarify my thoughts, formulate my opinions, and then set them forth with a reasonable amount of grace.

I managed to accomplish these tasks, although when my deadline came I was still crossing out, rearranging, and groping for thoughts that were just out of reach. Thursday morning I called the editor to say that I would need time to get the piece typed and delivered. No need, was the reply; he would merely connect me to the recording room. In a few moments I was dictating onto a tape recorder somewhere in the bowels of the *Times* building. My words were then transcribed into the paper's central word-processing computer. The person who performed this single operation has replaced the many typists, linotype operators, copy boys, and other assorted people who made the splendid chaos of the old newspaper office.

Later in the day the editor telephoned



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to say he had to make substantial cuts. This he could do by bringing my work onto his personal screen and typing in his changes. The computer then printed out the edited piece and it was sent to me by messenger—a nice old-fashioned touch that will be obsolete when all writers receive copy transmitted electronically.

It is a time-honored custom for New Yorkers to buy certain sections of the *Sunday Times* as early as Friday night. I joined the early birds and was amazed to see on the printed page those sentences that I had first conceived less than 48 hours before and had revised that same day.

News versus Wisdom

Long before the invention of the computer, newspapers were known for the speed with which they managed to get the news before the public. I have always wondered how reviewers of plays and concerts could dash off their pieces in an hour after the curtain descends, and how political columnists can opine on world events

practically as they occur. The computer has speeded up a process that was already proceeding at a breathtaking pace.

Participating in this process could not help but evoke feelings of admiration for the technical ingenuity entailed. But at the same time I found the experience discomfiting. There is something to be said, I suppose, for immediacy—for thinking "off the top of one's head," as it were. But for civilized discussion and debate—which is what we try to achieve when we write and read essays—there should be time for deliberation, for rethinking those insights that at first seem so compelling and later appear so flawed.

If the future could be defined by extrapolation, one would predict that writing, printing, and reading as we know them will disappear. Work is already under way on computers that will convert spoken words into written text. Futurists tell us that each household will be furnished with electronic screens to which we will conjure news, mail, articles, and books (if they still exist). People will "network," communicating instantaneously with any person or any place in the world.

Communicating with Care

I hope and believe that this vision of the future is considerably wide of the mark. We should have learned by now that extrapolation is an unreliable guide, particularly with respect to the course of "modernity." Not long ago, we were enthusiastically covering our landscapes with highways and parking lots when we suddenly discovered how much we valued greenery and wilderness and how readily we can effectuate programs that reflect these values. Similarly, I foresee a time when we will choose to speak more slowly and write more deliberately.

I know that many respected writers are infatuated with their word processors and delighted with the ways their words can be disseminated. I, too, enjoy anything that makes life easier, and it surely is nice to be able to revise what one has written without thinking it will have to be completely retyped. But if, as I believe, the quality of our thought is related to both leisurely contemplation and the measured function of our hand, then ever-increasing speed may have an adverse effect on what we write. I suggest that our desire to communicate quickly must be tempered by our need to converse meaningfully. □



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